

SPECIAL SYMPOSIUM

Gender – the transgender tipping-point?

Introduction to the symposium

Jennifer Maidman*

Songwriter, music maker, and former counsellor and co-editor of Self & Society

Gender is one of those words that seems to carry quite different meanings for different people, at different times. Historically it's been a word often used interchangeably with 'sex', but that is certainly changing; until quite recently, those who did not identify with the gender to which they had been assigned at birth were seen as transitioning to the 'opposite sex' (in itself a revealing and inherently polarizing term), and were typically described as 'transsexual' and as having had a 'sex change'. More recently, however, 'gender reassignment' became the terminology of choice, perhaps suggesting a shift in perception towards something less polarized and biologically deterministic, and a separation of the concept of 'sex' from that of 'gender'. Having myself been assigned male at birth, and having later transitioned to female, I do have a particular interest in how gender is experienced and perceived, yet still I might struggle to come up with a precise definition. Like many aspects of identity and expression, gender can slip through the fingers when we try to pin it down. Perhaps that's why it has fascinated writers, artists and poets for centuries.

It has for some time seemed to me that there is a growing realization in mainstream culture – and the internet has surely played a part here – that gender identity has much more to do with a particular human being's individual sense of being-in-the-world, and how they need and/or wish to express that. Rather than constituting either a simple biological given, i.e. something that can be assumed to proceed automatically and inevitably from a person's apparent biological sex, or some sort of coercive socio-political structure that can be reduced to simple concepts such as 'patriarchy', it is increasingly obvious that the way in which real human beings actually experience and express gender in the real world is just far too complex and multi-dimensional to be contained within convenient but ultimately academic abstractions. The increasing amount of gender-related news, art, music and comment appearing across popular culture and social networks suggests that there may be some sort of major paradigm shift underway in our collective understanding and acceptance of what gender is, and the diverse ways in which it expresses itself.

Until recently it seemed to be somewhat taboo to question taken-for-granted assumptions that underpinned much mainstream discourse on the subject of gender, but it seems that recently, gender, and particularly the transgender community of which I am part, has become 'hip'! Suddenly, there are sitcoms featuring trans characters, documentaries about trans people, and sympathetic articles in the press. A high-profile celebrity transitioner, Caitlyn (formerly Bruce) Jenner, was featured on

*Email: jennifer@earthmusic.com

the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine, and now has her own prime-time reality TV series. Paris Lees, a British trans activist, appears on current affairs programmes, and is even asked for her opinion on non-gender-related subjects. Young people in particular are increasingly using non-binary pronouns, and identifying with new terms such as 'Gender Fluid'. For those of us who have long identified as transgender, and have become used to a pervading climate of hostility, suspicion and ridicule, particularly from elements within the media, all of this is very welcome. It has been a long time coming. Optimist though I am, I do think there is further to go before gender variance is truly accepted and fully integrated into the wider culture. Still, it's a good start, and perhaps Humanistic Psychology, as a force for greater empathy, respect and understanding, can take at least a bit of the credit for society having come this far.

Many humanistically orientated practitioners have of course long been interested in gender, its expression and its attendant stereotypes, roles and behaviours, and perhaps none more so than our very own Humanistic Psychology 'elder statesman', **John Rowan**. John has been at the forefront for decades, exploring, questioning and challenging assumptions about masculinity, femininity and everything in between. For this gender-themed symposium, John has drawn on his long experience as a practitioner and a thinker to bring us a thoughtful piece entitled 'An aim for men'. John's alternative title, incidentally, was 'What are we aiming at?' – a useful question to ask ourselves, I think, wherever we may identify on the gender spectrum.

Jay Stewart's piece is called 'Trans knowledge'. Jay may be a new name for some S&S readers, but I have known Jay and the wonderful work he does with and on behalf of trans and gender variant people for many years. Jay has a profound understanding of his subject and offers us an in-depth exploration of trans experiences, perceptions and knowledge. Essential reading for any humanistic practitioner wishing to broaden their understanding regarding the ways gender variant people move through their world.

Charlotte Thomas's excellent article brings a practitioner's perspective to some of the specific issues that can arise in the field of bereavement counselling for transgender clients. Although the specific focus here may be on bereavement, many of the issues Charlotte looks at, and the research she draws upon, can be seen as having broad significance for any work with this client group.

Finally, I have retro-reviewed Arlene Istar Lev's book *Transgender Emergence: Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender Variant People and Their Families*. First published in 2004 and now available on Kindle, for me Arlene's book remains a definitive work on the subject.

My thanks go to co-editors Richard and David for inviting me to guest edit this symposium; it has been a privilege. And of course heartfelt thanks to the three authors for their insightful and thought-provoking articles. I hadn't originally intended for this symposium to focus specifically on transgender issues, but things just seem to have come out that way anyway. Perhaps we really are, as Charlotte says in her contribution, at some sort of 'trans tipping point'.

Notes on contributor

Guest editor Jennifer Maidman is a songwriter, musician, producer and former counsellor and co-editor of *Self & Society*, who has written extensively on the subject of Humanistic Psychology. A long-time member of the Penguin Café Orchestra, her solo album, 'Dreamland', will be released later this year. Website: www.jennifermaidman.com.